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ABSTRACT

Although rhetoric is traditionally viewed through its relationships with law, politics, philosophy, and religion, other disciplines, such as economics, also shape contemporary rhetorics, and these rhetorics influence current writing pedagogies. "Product" and "process" theories of composition can be examined in light of the rhetoric of "possessive individualism"--the view that the right to possession is the keystone of human freedom. In the "product" approach to composition, students rely on their own abilities and application for success (i.e. good grades). Because ownership is linked to honor or disgrace in possessive individualism, grades define students, and their relationships to the meaning of their writing is undermined. "Process" approaches seek to eliminate this aspect of the "product" approach by inviting students to join the discourse community of the composition classroom as equal members. But the "process" approach also views students as individual creators of discourse, ultimately accountable for the success or failure of their texts. Grades are still something that students finally "get," and are statements of individual worth. By endorsing students' rights to "get" grades rather than their need to develop critical, social consciousness, both approaches support the promise of upward mobility for possessive individualists at a time when economic realities suggest that upward mobility is a myth. Although educators are beginning to recognize how meaning is produced in social processes, composition curricula continue to protect the individual right to possess meaning. (MM)

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The Rhetoric of Possessive Individualism

Since classical antiquity, rhetoric has developed as a conceptual framework for the formulation and disposition of arguments in the assembly, law court, classroom and church. Rhetoric has, in other words, helped orators and writers to produce discourse for discipline-specific arenas. But living, as we do, in the nineteen-eighties, with our postmodern understanding of the intertextual and political nature of the disciplines, we may be ready to believe that it is no longer productive to think of rhetoric purely in terms of its traditional, subservient relationships with law, politics, philosophy and religion. We may, instead, decide to investigate how other disciplines, such as economics, shape our rhetorics, and how these rhetorics form our writing pedagogies. In this way, we may learn, not merely how economic discourse is produced and received, but how an economics sanctions certain rhetorics, how literacy education reflects our economic and political system, and

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how literacy education supports our economic and political systems.

According to C. B. MacPherson, "possessive individualism" is the seventeenth-century view that the right to possession is the keystone of human freedom. The individual is a free agent in the economic and political market place, able to enter into relations where he or she wills, capable of making his or her own decisions, sole authority for the exchange of goods that he or she produces. In this scheme, the individual possesses natural rights to liberty, privacy, self-development and self-reliance, as well as social and self-responsibility, because he or she possesses property and goods. To put this another way, just as possession is the source of privilege, privilege is the result of possession. Failure to own is a mark of disgrace, of a lack of initiative, a reason for being powerless and subjugated. While all of this makes for a tidy package of social values, the economic world of the seventeenth century no longer exists. Individuals are no longer free and self-directing agents. In late-capitalist market places, individuals are not self-determined; they are controlled by capital relations to which most never gain access.

Despite its inherent inconsistencies, the theory of possessive individualism and the liberal democratic ideals it sanctions do not seem to be in danger of being reputed. Possessive individualism is, to put it simply, as resilient as it is entrenched in American thought and policy, and it

continues to influence every facet of the our experience, including education. We can observe this in contemporary conceptions of rhetoric and writing instruction.

The field of composition studies has seen in the last seventeen years a consistent, forceful, and persuasive critique of "product" theories and pedagogies by a group of theorists who have themselves been labeled "process" composition theorists. The terms of this debate, "process" and "product," have allowed us to talk about the amorphous field of composition studies, and this talk has certainly changed how some of us teach composition. At the same time, however, these terms have hindered useful, even necessary, discussion because, as any comprehensive survey of composition texts and theories will demonstrate, one person's "product" approach to writing instruction is another person's "process" approach. The problem is that for all the research and publishing that has been done on the value of the "process" over the "product" position, the field of composition studies as a whole does not yet fully understand either of them, particularly the differences between them. "Process" and "product" are terms that are not exact enough to accommodate the array of theoretical positions that both have come to entail.

I hope that I can shed some light on this problem by following a different course from those of my predecessors. You see, while I recognize that it is important to explore the theoretical and practical discrepancies between

"product" and "process" theories, it may be even more useful to explore their similarities, such as their mutual reliance on the theory possessive individualism, so that we may extend our knowledge beyond them both.

I would like to begin my brief discussion with the "product" approach to composition, where students are conceived of as individual interpreters and creators of discourse, where all must rely upon their own abilities and application for success and progress. Although students do sometimes create discourse for teachers rather than themselves, the relative success or failure of their writing is their affair. After all, they are the ones who must decide apply themselves and "fix" their errors for they are always obliged to "own" the grades that they "receive" or "get." These grades are "their" grades. But grades are more than mere statements of student performance, they are also harbingers of future economic success. Good grades imply good future jobs, bad grades, bad jobs. And because ownership is linked to honor or disgrace in the ideology of possessive individualism, grades imply the extent to which students are deserving of the rights shared by all market-participating individuals. The fact is that grades are currently, however much educators profess otherwise, statements about the worth of individual students, and grades will remain such as long as students compete with each other for good ones, for good rankings in the academy. Grades help to define, then, a student's sense of dignity as

a student. But grades in "product" classrooms represent something else, too, because they are created by teachers who have focused, as is often the case in "product" classrooms, on the lower order concerns of a student's text. Thus the grades that these teachers produce are based not on what students have written, but on subjective assessment of how they have written it. This form of assessment, it seems to me, affronts a student's dignity as a maker of meaning because their relationship to the meaning that they make is undermined, resulting in alienation and statements like, "I can't write" or "I'm no good at writing."

It is here that "process" theories of composition have made an important contribution to writing instruction. Because they seek to authorize students to be writers, they do much to restore the dignity of students by automatically inviting them to join as equal members, or at least pretending to do so, of the discourse community of the composition classroom. All well and good. But the ideology of possessive individualism informs this pedagogy as much as it does the "product" approach. With its entailed Neo-Kantian, romantic views of the individuality of writers, its conception of the solitary nature of the composing process, and with its valorization of privacy and self-expression, the "process" approach conceives, like the "product" approach, though for different reasons, of students as individual creators of discourse. Students are responsible for the texts they make; in fact, a major statement of this

movement is that students have a right to authority over their own texts. Students, then, are still ultimately accountable for the relative success or failure of their texts. Granted, in the "process" classroom students ideally have the opportunity or task to write several drafts, with their teacher attempting to facilitate the writing process. Here teachers will often focus on the higher order concerns of student texts, supporting the view that students are self-reliant makers of meaning and encouraging them to make statements like "I can write" and "I 'm a good writer." Often, too, students create portfolios of their work, deciding which papers they wish to be graded, sometimes through peer and self-evaluation processes. All of this certainly marks an attempt to give students greater control over the meaning they make and to reduce the alienating distance between student writer and student writing. Still, grades are something that students finally "get," and, once again, they are harbingers of future economic success, are statements of individual achievement, ability and worth.

Now I do not wish to suggest that we ought to make absolute freedom from evaluation or curriculum our goal. Far from it. The social order of the classroom depends on rational environmental objectives. But we may still productively ask ourselves what sort of social order it is that we are seeking to advance, or if we wish to further an order that is contradictory to economic, political and social realities. You see, our curricula support the

promise of upward mobility for possessive individualists at a time when economic realities suggest that upward mobility is a myth and possessive individualism is valid for early, not late, capitalist societies. And as I see it, this problem gnaws at the heart of both the "product" and the "process" approaches to writing instruction because they both have traditionally endorsed the students' right "to get" good grades or ahead, rather than the students' need to develop critical, social consciousness. We are currently beginning to recognize how meaning is produced in social, rather than individual, processes, yet as they are currently constructed, our composition curricula seem to protect the individual right to possess meaning. This incongruity leads me to believe that without an understanding of how our rhetorics reflect economic ideologies, we may never know what we are helping our students to achieve.

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